

**Testimony of Montgomery County Council President Blair Ewing  
On 2002 State Legislative Priorities**

Rockville, Maryland      November 8, 2001

On behalf of the County Council, I want to thank you for this opportunity to talk about our County's priorities for the coming legislative session.

I also want to thank you for all you do to champion our County's interests in Annapolis and to make sure we get our fair share of the resources we need to meet our critical needs – in education, transportation, health and human services, and in a host of other areas. And I want to thank you for what you do to make sure all of Maryland's boats are rising together – because we truly are all in this together.

If recent economic forecasts are accurate and if indeed we are entering recessionary times, we all will have choices to make – you on the state level and we on the local level. These may be very, very difficult choices.

That's why it is important for us to make the right choices – to light the lamp of learning for our kids and grandkids, to give commuters more transportation choices while supporting the need for "Smart Growth" and preserving our quality of life, and to protect the most vulnerable among us.

You have a listing of priorities agreed on by the County Council and the County Executive. In the interest of time, I will not go through the list item-by-item.

I do, however, want to highlight a few areas.

On education, we simply cannot nickel-and-dime or scrimp on our schools. They are a major investment in our future. They are our "seed corn" –to use an agricultural point of reference. And we will pay heavily down the road for any shortcuts we are tempted to take in the here and now.

We must support increases in funding for special education, transportation, English language instruction, programs for early childhood, and a phase-in of full-day kindergarten as determined locally.

We must be sure that any restructuring of State aid for education fairly addresses the very real needs of our growing and diverse school population.

And we have to do right by our students with limited English by slamming the door on any proposal to calculate ESOL monies by an overall wealth formula. We have, after all, half of all the ESOL students in the entire state of Maryland right here in Montgomery.

To meet our burgeoning school population and facilitate the Council's initiative to reduce class size, we need adequate State aid for school construction. The State has been generous in the past several years and, it seems, may be less able to help this year. We are requesting \$22.2 million – and we need every penny of that. I urge you to put this at the very top of your individual lists.

On transportation, we must have adequate state support for our balanced transportation approach that includes road improvements that make sense and more mass transit. We are all in traffic. We all want to spend less time on the road and more time with our loved ones. We want a balanced approach to traffic congestion that is cost-effective and can make a difference now – as well as ten or twenty years down the road.

People need more transportation choices – choices that are practical, doable, and don't destroy the quality of life that has made Montgomery County unique. That's what this Council is committed to and what we recommend to you.

We very much appreciate the commitment of the Governor and the legislature to mass transit projects that can truly give County commuters more options. Let's continue to implement that broad range of initiatives.

We have a number of projects "on deck" for immediate funding – at the intersection of Rockville Pike and Montrose Road, at US 29 at Fairland Road, I-270 at Watkins Mill Road, in Brookeville, and mass transit projects along Georgia Avenue and Veirs Mill Road and more – that are ready to move to the next stage, but are not reflected in the draft Consolidated Transportation Program.

While some areas of the state budget have enjoyed favor these past years, others have endured benign neglect – or worse. In my view, the State has virtually abdicated its responsibility in the field of mental health. Our mental health crisis in the County is fueled by the State paying providers little and paying late.

The announced closing of the outpatient mental health clinic at Montgomery General Hospital is only the latest domino to fall. The State should step up to the plate by approving our proposed state/county cost containment pilot program for \$500,000 and by supporting our \$1.3 million request to support the remaining outpatient mental health clinics that are struggling to keep their heads above water.

In addition to mental health shortfalls, we need to insure that the Return and Divert Services program should have adequate funding for those developmentally disabled children and their families already in the program and that similar services are available to others in need.

As for the Wheaton Center in the former Glenmont School, it too is a priority but the issue of the Board of Education's possible need to recover the site is not yet resolved.

Finally, continued State support for our Moderately-Priced Dwelling Unit program through the State Rental Housing Partnership Program is critical to our efforts to preserve and expand the stock of affordable housing in our County. We need the State to step up its efforts in this area.

In closing, thank you again for the opportunity to speak. The County Council stands ready to work with you in the upcoming session in order to achieve our common objectives.